

Formula for a Successful Academic Move

By Joy Gianakura, Ed.D.



Building renovations and new construction are necessary within higher education. Colleges and universities are constantly adapting to the demands of changing programs, enrollments, and aging or inadequate facilities. Research exists in the area of change theory and how individuals may be impacted by change. The culture of the workplace, including the values of an organization and its rich history, is also well represented.

Higher education has long-standing traditions that, when challenged, can cause great angst and mistrust among faculty and staff. Eckel, Green, Hill, and Mallon (1999) asserted that most colleges and universities are change-averse, and that leaders must respectfully take the long-standing traditions within institutions into account prior to implementing a change. Throughout my 30-plus years within higher education, this statement has proven to be accurate.

A study I conducted in 2013 focused on addressing the question of whether a physical change in work environment influences the working culture of an academic unit, thereby bridging the gap between change and culture (Gianakura, 2013). A distinct connection between employees moving to a new construction and how that change may reframe organizational culture was the focus of the study.



Qualitative research was employed by utilizing a midwestern state university that had constructed a new building that houses several departments within one academic college. This is a good-sized university, with a population of over 20,000 students. The findings illustrate the ways in which the culture of an academic unit is reframed, which includes the assumptions, artifacts, and values held by the faculty and staff impacted by the move.

As a result of this study, the following were found to be key factors when considering taking on such a venture. By utilizing these ideas, you can be more strategic and inclusive in your own move process. These findings may also serve as a foundation for discussion in your planning meetings prior to, during, and after construction, renovations, and a move.

PROXIMITY

Proximity to faculty colleagues, as well as proximity to the resources that enhance the student experience, are vital to the design process. A more positive feeling about work can result if faculty are positioned closer to their department's main office and clustered together as faculty colleagues in the new space. An increased level of privacy coupled with closer proximity to offices that provide direct support to students can provide a sense of follow-through when a faculty member can walk a student down the hall or upstairs to receive appropriate assistance.

Based on the study findings, it is apparent that faculty appreciate being able to help students by not having to send them across campus for assistance. Another benefit of proximity is intentionally building community. Temple discussed the concept of community within a building. "The creation of a community and its culture turns the university space into a place," and can be considered locational capital (Temple 2009, p. 22).

INFLUENCE OF THE BUILDING ON WORK

Realistically, not everyone will be exuberant about the move. Regardless of the level of resistance an individual has about the change, assure they have the right tools and environment to do their work. It should not be surprising that those who dislike the new building and its functionality may very well be those who most resisted the move to the new building from the very beginning.

The goal for planning an academic space should be that of leveraging the classroom environment. One area in which faculty should reach consensus is that of the arrangement of the classroom space and the necessary, updated improvement of technology within the classrooms. When working with deans, department chairs, and other academic decision-makers, take the time to gather input and listen to the needs of the faculty. The classroom is where they do their core work. Regardless of our roles, we all have specific needs in order to be able to do our best work. Paz and Viriyavadhana (2002) state that job satisfac-



tion is a key element to a relocation, and that a building is much more than a place where work is done; it is also an arena for *how* work is done.

TIMING CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

It is not uncommon for individuals to feel that work is disrupted unnecessarily as a result of a move. One way to alleviate this is to be extremely intentional with the timing. Moving is inherently disruptive in some manner, but administration can minimize the angst some may feel by planning carefully for the migration. For instance, avoid a faculty relocation during an academic semester, or exam week, or at the time final grades are to be submitted. Do whatever is possible to lessen the disruption to the work process.

We know the academic cycle and workflow well in advance, often up to a year or more. Being cognizant of this can make all the difference when dealing with resistance about a move. Include all impacted faculty and staff in the planning! Hickman (2010) tells us that stability within a change situation is challenged when the loss of freedom happens or when rights are compromised. Intentionality with regard to timing can make all the difference.

COMMUNICATION FLOW

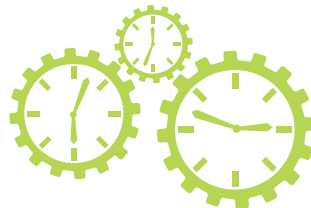
At a time of change, communication is your ally. The move to a new facility is often irreversible and long lasting; therefore, communication from leadership throughout the process is a key component to the success of the relocation (Boyce, 2003).

New construction as well as renovations typically originate from the top down and are defined and constrained. All components of the change should be clearly planned. Modifications that are deemed necessary throughout the process should be communicated in a timely manner.

Planned and inclusive change increases cooperation throughout the process (Buono & Kerber, 2010). As meetings take place and feedback is received, formally or informally, a balance between the needs of the people and the requirements of the building project is critical to the planning process.

MANAGE THE TANGIBLES AND THE INTANGIBLES

Change leadership must address the tangible and the intangible components of institutional change (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). The building is a tangible, whereas the process of moving and being able to understand how work will happen in a new environment is considered an intangible. Ask what overall decisions are going to have the greatest impact on the employees. Discuss the positive aspects of the move (i.e., new facility, new workspace, increased technology, better parking, etc.). The goal is that the general excitement felt by most will outweigh the negativity of a few outliers.



AFTER THE MOVE

After a move has taken place, there tends to be a period when certain “rules” must be adhered to, for instance, not putting nails in the walls or hanging things on your own without the assistance of facilities; another example is keeping personal items at a minimum. There are often many questions surrounding these rules, and while the reasons are rational, there is often little communication about *why* they are necessary. They often have to do with tours of the building and the timing of punch-list completion.

One lesson I personally learned as a result of a relocation project was the importance of taking the time to individually visit with each employee a couple of weeks after they have settled into their new space. Certainly this is time-consuming, but as an administrator I can tell you that it is very much worth the time. Asking what may be missing from the workspace, or if there is something that could make the new environment more comfortable, is a strategy that is well received, yields good will, and may bring to light the need for small adjustments that can have a great impact. On one occasion an employee asked if they could have a waste can. This was an easy fix!

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

My study revealed the importance for the faculty of the administration being timely, accurate, and understanding of their work situation when positioning the move. To accomplish this goal, the academic unit(s) and facilities must make a sincere and deliberate effort at coordination.

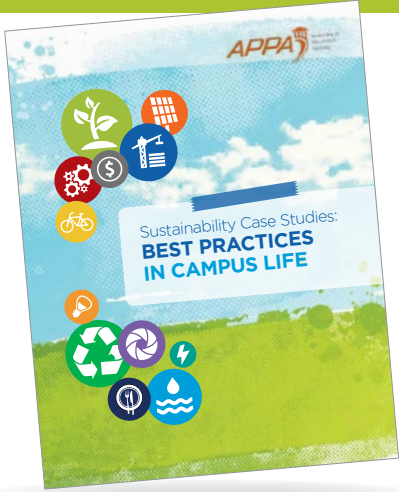
At the onset of the move, it should be agreed that faculty will experience minimal (if any) interruption to their core work. The more concrete and timely the information shared prior to a relocation project, the more at ease those impacted will be. Carefully considering the academic calendar and faculty obligations may alleviate the tension of faculty having their offices in one space and teaching in another. Using administrative forethought in the timing of a move is critical, particularly if the faculty is supported by a union.

The results of my study indicate specific strategies that can be developed for per-



forming a move. Developing a plan that includes faculty representation in the creation of the move timeline can assure faculty and staff have a voice when creating the workflow. Concurrently, the faculty and staff can learn and appreciate the bigger picture of their move and the impact it will have on the university. Quite often, faculty and staff do not fully understand the influence of the university community. Involving them at this level, with a representative, can help the planners understand the role of faculty and more importantly,

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help the faculty understand their role within the larger university community infrastructure.

APPRECIATING THE FUTURE

Senge and Kleiner (1999) acknowledged that there is some level of anxiety when people are asked to work differently. It is this worry that perpetuates resistance to change and may create negative feelings across an organization. It should not be assumed that all who experience change are resisters. To the contrary, most of the research participants in my study were eager for the new location and all that it could bring.

Each interest group has its own goal. My study revealed that administration was working toward a timeline including occupancy permits, securing moving bids from vendors, fire inspections, and donor demands. Faculty were concerned about where their offices would be, the number of bookshelves they would have, and the ability to teach their classes and meet or preferably exceed the expectations of their students. Both parties tended to concentrate on their own needs, expectations, and deadlines.

My study brought to light that developing a rapport between administration and faculty might result in better communication, a better understanding of each other's interests, and an appreciation of the future. Faculty spoke about many positive aspects of the building after they occupied the space. This observation illustrates that understanding and envisioning the future can build a stronger appreciation for a new facility prior to the actual relocation.


SAYING GOODBYE TO THE PAST

A large part of embracing and appreciating the future can be accomplished by acknowledging, mourning, and celebrating the past. The past is what created the current culture of the academic unit. Eckel, Green, Hill, and Mallon (1999) recommend town hall meetings, small-group discussions, and electronic conversations. They also recommend training and support along with pacing the change into more incremental pieces.

My study revealed that while these suggestions are all valid and appropriate, a more involved, personal process might be in order for such a migration to a new facility. One could add the concept of a time capsule that reflects the important features of the current culture, which includes artifacts from individual departments. A more celebratory process involving the move may help to engage the

faculty and staff as they segue to a new environment and process the change.

The buildings that were vacated by the faculty in my study were later occupied by other members of the university community. A few notes of remembrance and appreciation for the space that was vacated could prove to be healing to those who left it behind and soothing for those who are occupying the space as "new" to them. The traditions left behind can be communicated to the new occupants and could result in a feeling of peace among those who are moving on. It can also be a glimpse into the past for those who are adopting the old space as their new work home.

Creating new facilities should be an exciting time for an organization. Leveraging the lessons learned during the process can minimize the stress for all involved, and create a stronger culture as a result of change. 



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